

Wild Child, Feral Text: Reading the Human-Animal Borderland

By

Anne Patricia Fagan

BA (Hons) University of Tasmania

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

University of Tasmania

October, 2010

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of the figure variously known as the “wild child,” “feral child,” or “borderland child” as it appears in six contemporary literary texts. I identify two interrelated strands of inquiry that can be usefully brought to bear on these wild-child texts. First, how can such children, generally lacking in many if not all verbal and written language skills, be adequately represented, and their perspective portrayed, in textual form? Secondly, how has the human/animal boundary been constructed in and through literature, and how may it potentially be deconstructed, through the specific framework of the wild-child narrative?

My thesis examines three pairs of novels. In the first chapter I look at two novels based on the true case of Victor of Aveyron, a wild boy captured from the woods of France at the dawn of the Enlightenment: Mordecai Gerstein’s *Victor: A Novel Based on the Life of the Savage of Aveyron* (1998) and Jill Dawson’s *Wild Boy* (2003). The two texts examined in the second chapter—Eva Hornung’s *Dog Boy* (2009) and Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2007)—use details derived from actual contemporary feral-child encounters to create new characters. Urban-dwelling and homeless, these children have more in common, perhaps, with a stray dog than with the mythical figures of Romulus and Remus, or even Victor of Aveyron. In the final chapter, I demonstrate the versatility of the wild-child category by applying it to two characters who do not ostensibly seem to fit within it: Simon in Keri Hulme’s *The Bone People* (1986) and the eponymous gorilla in Peter Goldsworthy’s *Wish* (1995). These borderland-children, I argue, work to further worry the edges of the human/animal divide.

My theoretical approach draws predominantly from the emerging discipline of Animal Studies. The six texts I study use representations of bodies, body languages, and sensory descriptions that attempt to imagine an alternative to the logocentrism of the human perception of the world. In examining how language works as a theme, a device, and the foundation for evoking the wild-child character, my aim is to identify the ways in which language is used to demarcate, and elevate, humanity from the rest of animal-kind. Conversely, and perhaps more importantly, my thesis also seeks to demonstrate the ways in which fictional imaginings and constructions of wild child characters can work to undermine the human/animal boundary.

Acknowledgements

Of the many people to thank, I acknowledge the following here:

My supervisors, Dr. Elizabeth Leane, Dr Helen Tiffin, and Dr Lisa Fletcher, for all their help, suggestions, and patience.

The administrative staff of the School of English and my fellow post-graduate colleagues for their support and sympathy.

The Lotus Eaters Cafe in Cygnet for providing a haven (not to mention the coffee) for the last 2 years.

My friends for their continued support, and my father for looking after me and my dogs, Ginger and Lassie.

Most of all I have to acknowledge my beloved cat Milo who died half way through the production of this thesis.



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